



CHAPTER 5

JUNIPER HAD AN IDEA, and that idea morphed into a plan, and that plan was put into execution, and that execution was taking place presently. It was well after bedtime. Blanket pulled to her chin, head caught in the plushness of her pillow, she was asleep. Or at least she appeared to be, for this was part of her plan. She could just barely see out of the tiniest of slits she had made of her eyelids, and what she waited to see were shadows in the hall, just outside her door, coming for her.

She didn't have to wait very long.

With the rain pounding against the window, growing heavier by the minute, she watched the stretch of

darkness reach her bedroom door. They were here.

Juniper had formed the plan earlier that evening, shortly after Giles left. It was Kitty who sparked it. She was trembling before Juniper, whimpering uncontrollably, her sad eyes glassy. In rapid bursts, she scratched at Juniper's legs, then took off down the hall.

Curious, Juniper followed.

A minute later, she found herself outside her father's study. The door was open and the moaning from inside was audible. "Oooohhh. Oooohhh." It sounded painful and caused Kitty to retreat, most likely beneath some blankets or sheets where so many have fooled themselves into believing they are safe—it was okay, she had done her job.

Stepping into the room, Juniper saw her father lying on the floor. He was on his back with his arms and legs stretched wide like a fallen star, staring at the ceiling. The moaning suddenly ceased and, quietly, eerily, he began to sing damaged, twisted notes that crawled from down his throat in a scratching grind and grew to a near shriek:

I don't know what's right.

There's nothing in my head.

*Nothing in sight.
There's nothing in my head.
Nothing but white.*

*I am me, but I'm not me
I'm not me, but I am me
I am me, but I'm not me
I'm not me, but I am me.*

Then, clutching his stomach, he went back to moaning in the voice that didn't seem to be his own. "Oooohhh. Oooohhh."

"Dad?"

Sharply, Mr. Berry turned his head but appeared to look right through her. His eyes frightened Juniper and, heart pounding, she took a quick step back, ready to run.

"Yes, Juniper?" he said, and the words were distorted, her name battered into a guttural absurdity. To Juniper, it almost sounded like two different voices overlapping each other, his own and something else, something otherworldly. He swallowed and coughed, nearly gagging.

"Are . . . are you okay?"

“No. No, I’m not,” he whispered, his voice slowly returning to him.

“What’s the matter?”

“I’m lost. The character . . . he won’t come to me. Or he will and he won’t go. I don’t know anymore. The pieces don’t fit together.”

Juniper couldn’t understand; her father had starred in dozens of movies, and he was so greatly admired, by none more than her. She glanced over at his shelves of awards—two Oscars, four Golden Globes, dozens of critics prizes. He never struggled like this. Never.

“Can I help?”

“No. I’m afraid you can’t.”

“Why not?” she asked.

He turned back to the ceiling, raised his arms, and pulled at his auburn hair. “Forget I even said anything. Go tell your mother I have to talk to her. Hurry. This can’t wait much longer.”

Then, with his arms in the air, fingers tugging away at large clumps of hair, his sleeves fell to his elbows and she saw marks, red marks that sent her stomach plunging. “Dad? What’s that on your arms?”

Mr. Berry quickly pulled his sleeves down and sat straight up, glaring at her with damaged, volcanic eyes.

“I said go!” he screamed.

Hurrying off, Juniper couldn’t help but think about Giles’s story of his parents. Something was wrong, and she needed to find out what. She clenched her fists. A plan would be needed.

Juniper waited until her mother closed the study door, then began to search for the best spot to hear their voices. Once she found it, she placed the rim of a dinner glass against the door. Ear to the bottom, she closed her eyes as if this would make things even clearer. Soon, her parents’ words found their way through the wall and into the glass.

“How long has it been?” her mother asked, her words only slightly muffled. “I feel like I’m losing track of time.”

“Just hold out until tonight.”

“We’re doing the right thing, aren’t we?” Mrs. Berry coughed viciously. She sounded horribly sick, not that Mr. Berry was concerned.

“Do you even have to ask? It’s the only way.”

“You know I hate going there.”

“Are you trying to tell me it’s not worth it? Would you like to give up everything we have? Go back to . . . to . . .” Mr. Berry couldn’t complete his thought.

“To our old lives?”

“I can barely remember that life. Can you?”

“There isn’t much to remember, is there?”

“No. No, I guess not. All the more reason to—”

There was a crash. Moans, commotion. Juniper’s heart raced as she tried to decipher the sounds.

“Inside . . .” It was her mother’s voice. “It hurts so much.”

“Get up. Fight it. It’s getting dark. It’ll be time to leave soon enough.”

Juniper had heard all she needed. She fled to her room.

In the hall, hours after this incident, with the plan finally taking effect, the shadows stirred. Juniper pulled her blankets tight and forced her eyes closed. There was a quiet creak as the door was pushed slowly open. Then, a short moment later, her father’s head peered into the room. He gave a quick scan and whispered, “She’s sleeping. We have to go now.”

Mrs. Berry pulled her husband away from the door. “We need this. It means everything. I think I’d die without—”

“Keep your voice down. She’ll hear. We can’t have her involved. Not ever. Now, come on.”

And with that, the shadows chased her parents away.

Juniper, completely dressed, shot up in her bed as if poked by a very sharp and perhaps scorching stick, reached over to her nightstand, and grabbed her binoculars. Taking a deep breath, she moved to the window. Outside, the yard was eclipsed by darkness. Then she brought the lenses to her eyes.

The newest addition to her spyglass collection was the night-vision enhancement to her binoculars. It was something she'd wanted for a long time and had received it on her most recent birthday in a blue box handed to her by the chauffeur with a tag reading *Love, Mom and Dad*. She still received gifts for such occasions as her birthday and Christmas and so on, but her parents, like on most days, usually weren't present.

And now she was going to find out why.

She scanned the yard, waiting for a glimpse of her parents in the pouring rain. The world appeared to her in shades of green—there was lime and olive, chartreuse and viridian, jungle green, electric green, spring green, and midnight green. But, amazingly, everything was clear. With infinite detail she saw the trees and grass and the night critters and the gazebo and the

plump moon and the drops of rain splashing the pool water. She saw the world as if it were lit by a neon green sun.

But still, there was no sign of her parents. Was she actually mistaken? Was there no connection between her parents' behavior and the tree she and Giles had inspected?

Her bedroom door creaked back open.

With a gasp, she turned. Stretching across the carpet toward her was a shadow, a feline-shaped shadow. Juniper let loose a sigh of relief. It was only Kitty. There was comfort in seeing her dog, knowing she wasn't alone, and she was pretty sure Kitty felt the same.

Kitty jumped onto the bed. "I know you can sense it, too," Juniper whispered, giving her a quick stroke. "I've seen how you've been avoiding them. It's okay, though. I'm going to figure all this out." With that assurance, Kitty curled into a ball on the pillow and Juniper returned to the window. Just in time, too. There her parents were, running to the trees with their jackets pulled over their heads, the yellow beams of flashlights splitting the darkness. "See," she said, "I knew it."

With her sneakers already on, Juniper ran out of

the room, down the stairs, and to the back door, Kitty close to her heels. Quietly, she pushed the door open and, just as Giles had his own, followed her parents into the woods.

The rain flattened her hair and her clothes were instantly drenched, but that didn't slow her. Stealthily, she tracked her parents; she darted around tree after tree, keeping her knees bent, body low to the ground, but there was no need: They never looked back. Through her night-vision-enhanced binoculars, she could see how intent they were on reaching their destination.

With Kitty in tow, Juniper found the ditch she dug several summers ago as part of her personal excavation site—she was in search of fossils or treasure or both—and dropped into it. Elbows propped up on the level ground, she spied on her parents trekking through the mud and brush. All that could be heard was the plopping of raindrops upon the black tarp lining the hole. The trees shook eerily in the moonlight, branches extended and wavering like tentacles. All animals, aside from Kitty, had sought cover long before. Juniper turned to look at her loyal companion beside her. “This is it,” she said.

For her parents, it wasn't even a search. They knew where they were going; they ran straight for it, straight for the tree, the very one Juniper expected them to reach. Sure enough, sitting on its favorite branch, even in the downpour, watching Mr. and Mrs. Berry gather round the trunk, was the raven. It flapped its wings and screeched into the midnight darkness.

Through the binoculars, Juniper watched her parents. They somehow looked relieved, even happy, happier than she had seen them in what felt like years. Under a pale moon, they bore the smiles she had long wished to see.

Mr. Berry pushed against the trunk and, a moment later, his wife walked behind the tree in a crouching position and was gone. She didn't appear on the other side or farther back in the woods or anywhere else for that matter. She simply wasn't there anymore. Juniper leaned forward. "Giles was right," she whispered.

Mr. Berry then followed her into the void, as did the raven. There was some type of threshold just behind the tree, there had to be, something just out of sight beyond which they could disappear. Juniper, refusing to lower her binoculars even to rub her eyes free of rain, waited.

As the ditch filled with water, a series of questions rumbled through her head at a rapid pace. If there was a door out there, where did it lead and how did her parents ever discover it? How long had they been going to the tree? What kept them coming back? Why didn't they tell her about it?

She had her own answers to all these questions, but they weren't proven, so she quickly dismissed them. Guesses and gossip and suspicions were never good enough. No, as she had learned, she had to know the real answers, the truth, and to get them she would have to discover them herself.

The rain pelted her skin. She was shivering, her teeth clattered away, goose bumps ran across her body. *This is what Giles experienced*, she realized. *Except I'm not going anywhere. I'm waiting for them right here.*

Twenty-eight minutes later, Juniper's parents, much to her excitement and distress, finally came into sight. There one moment, then gone, now back again. It was as if they had risen from the dead.

As they made their way from the tree, their marker into the void, Juniper saw something trailing after them, writhing in the night air. *Is that . . . it couldn't be.* Trembling, she focused her binoculars on the floating

objects. Yet what she saw didn't make sense; any and all logic must have been washed away by the rain. There, in her father's left hand, and one more in her mother's right, were balloons. Red balloons, on strings, like one would see at a carnival. Together, Mr. and Mrs. Berry walked through the woods like lost children.

Juniper finally pulled the binoculars away from her weary eyes. Her heart was beating ferociously. Her hands trembled. *What is going on? What is this? What is happening?*

It was time to find out.

With her parents back in the house, Juniper climbed out of the ditch. Kitty, perhaps sensing fear or danger or something more, whined. "No," Juniper whispered, "I have to do this, Kitty. I have to know."

As quietly as she could, dripping wet, Juniper opened the back door and went inside. It was an hour when only the house was supposed to talk with its creaks and cracks and ticks and tocks. Yet in reaching the hall, her sneakers squelching softly, she heard whispers. She couldn't make out any of the words but managed to follow the wisps of sound around several corners.

Her parents were in the dining room.

Down the hall she skulked, moving at a careful pace toward them, until she could hear their conversation clearly.

“Are you ready?” her father asked with a shaking voice.

“I hate this part,” her mother replied.

Juniper crouched all the way down and extended her neck much like a turtle to peer into the room. Her parents were seated at the table, one on either end, holding the balloons to the granite surface with both hands as if about to eat them. Their eyes seemed hungry, but their tense bodies appeared to be working against them.

“It’s for the better. It’s for our future. We need this.”

Slowly, her mother nodded.

“At the same time, then. On three.” Her father began to count, “One . . . two . . . three.” And up the balloons went to their mouths, their hands frantically undoing the knot. Ravenously, they began to suck the air from inside.

It was the noise that brought Juniper to her feet. They slurped the air like soup, except the pitch grew and grew, turning the air into a mighty wind down their throats.

Without thinking, Juniper ran into the room. “What are you doing?!”

And that was the moment she knew real fear.

Her mother turned to her, her face nearly melting, the skin bubbling from beneath, and screamed at her in a voice of utmost horror. “Get ooouuuutttt!” The words sounded strangled, deep, like a straining and damaged foghorn. Her mother’s eyes were no longer her own; they bulged grotesquely, yet the irises shrank away. Her mouth drooped and sagged as the air of the balloon found its home inside her body, her skin turbulent like boiling water. Bestial moans crept from across the table. There, her father’s head was leaning back, eyes to the ceiling as if satisfied, yet his legs shook violently and his body twitched. Not once did he turn to his daughter.

The veins in her neck pulsating viciously, Mrs. Berry screamed again, “Get ooouuuutttt!” And Juniper fled the room.